

CONTESTED TERRITORY IN FINDING CHRISTA

Julia Lesage, English Department, University of Oregon,
Eugene OR 97403.

Autobiography:

One of my goals in writing this essay is to reaffirm the value of autobiography for our age. We seem to be moving toward another reign of Cromwell, where concepts of moral action and concepts of the spiritual self once again are tied in the popular imagination to the most banal kind of bourgeois respectability -- as connoted by current social emphasis on law and order, long prison sentences, the war on drugs, social protection denied to the poor, and the widespread use of the term "family values" -- with its assumptions about the naturalness and sacredness of chastity for youth and motherhood for women. Autobiography asserts other kinds of subjective presences in the world than those ordinarily acknowledged. In particular, diaries, journals, and autobiographies fill a special need for people living in adverse circumstances. Those removed from social power use these vehicles of first person expression to articulate the ways that they and others are kept from living a full life. And, as is seen in such works as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the *Autobiographies* of Frederick Douglass, the autobiographic mode also affirms the ways that wounded subjectivities can be survivors' subjectivities, resistance subjectivities.

Within the specific context of contemporary documentary media, autobiography has uniquely structured women's film/video work. In these works, reflections on the self are usually placed in the context of interpersonal relations. In addition, women artists often explore the self's personae, fragmentation, ambivalence, layering, contradiction, and complexity. In independent media, autobiographical documentaries by women are also often formally experimental or reflexive. Such documentaries include Cheryl Dunye's *Love Me Mother*, where Dunye examines the layers of her identity as a black lesbian; Carolee Schneeman's *Plumb Line*, which draws a bleak portrait of a former lover; Deborah Hoffman's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, which looks at a mother's descent into Alzheimer's disease with respectful humor rather than despair; Vanalyne Green's *A Spy in the House that Ruth Built*, which traces her obsession with baseball and baseball players; and Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* which examines her and her sister's need to create images to affix identity, the difficulty of doing that because of the parents' silence about their interment in the 1940s, and the historical paucity of images of the U.S. internment of Japanese Americans in WW2.

I find these documentaries particularly interesting because they must find a way to deal with complexities that other documentaries often do not. For example, social issue documentaries may flatten out contradictions for the sake of advancing an argument or message; and artists of color, in particular, may work under the pressure of making such documentaries and practicing their craft as "a representative of their race" (Mercer and Julien). Furthermore, the social issue documentary is often formally unimaginative, usually with the excuse that the filmmakers needed to use a familiar style in order to get their film or video on television and thus reach large numbers of viewers.

Autobiographical works with their first person voice seem exonerated from this demand -- as if they proclaimed, "This is just about me and my experiences" -- but, in fact, such works have a particular political usefulness both in their formal strategies and in their assertions of complex personal identity.

The self that everyone has is not singular but plural. Selves. And these selves change over time. Contemporary autobiographers, both in literature and in the visual media, try to depict this plurality. They seek new formal strategies to bring into public consciousness images of and narratives about what some authors have called "the postmodern condition," that is the fact that we live in a rapidly changing world where we are multiply situated inside contradictory discourses and roles. The autobiographical documentaries by women mentioned above are based on contrapuntal dialogues between various voices, various aspects of the maker's identity, and discrete moments of that identity across time, often a span of generations. In their form the works may themselves be postmodern at the same time that they draw attention to the way the human self is textual.

Historiographer Hayden White has analyzed history as a narrative. He asserts that we can compose history only out of textual artifacts, that is, things said/done and then recorded, or objects of art and culture that remain from the past. We select from among these texts and objects that "speak" the past and use our selection, interpret it, from the perspective of the present. Out of such textual artifacts we construct our social identity. Our everyday access to the real, White says, is also made possible and confined by the boundaries of such texts. For example, in terms of autobiographical film/video or just in the everyday construction of personal identity, this "textual" establishing of identity is accomplished by our looking at old family photos, listening to what the older generation has to say about the past, or participating in gossip, that is, asking about and adding to the opinions that circulate about us and those we know.

We do these things in order to establish continuity out of our experience. We cannot face the succession of events which surround us and the moments of our life, experienced as a string of discrete "presents," as possibly discontinuous and thus meaningless. We strive to create meaningful histories. To do this, in an entirely unnoticed way, we constantly revisit the past in memory. We regularly re-experience in our imagination the details and emotional feelings of past moments and so reconstruct ourself in the present as a person continuous with that past (Eakin). We stubbornly persist in feeling ourselves as "naturally" unitary, unique, and important even though we do a lot of unconscious work to maintain ourselves as such.

Autobiographical works derive from our need to create a meaningful narrative of selfhood but they also question life's continuities. In particular, autobiographical works by women often question ideologies of the familiar, the family, and the natural, even as they offer the reader/viewer recalled moments from the domestic sphere which have great emotional impact. These works detail the ideological and institutional limits on women's lives, and in this way they analyze how a woman's subjectivity is subjugated and acted upon. They record feminine masochism, the common wounding of a woman's spirit which Frantz Fanon has described elsewhere as the "colonized mind (Lesage)." In

Finding Christa, the narrative reveals how Camille's being pregnant with Christa and then raising the child for four years "subjected" her to a way of life that she did not want for herself; simultaneously, being abandoned by Camille subjected Christa to traumatic childhood memories that will shape the rest of her life. The tape explores how the one's being the mother or child of the other shaped their subjectivities in a way that was out of their control.

At the same time, *Finding Christa* asserts another relation between the crafting process and the fractured self. It is the act of re-visioning, so common in women's personal writing. As Christa enters Camille's life twenty years after Camille gave her up for adoption, the older woman can re-see herself. For Camille and perhaps also for her husband and co-director, James Hatch, making the film allows her to reconstruct something she had pushed out of her mind, a part of herself she had thought she had amputated or expelled. Her family members had condemned her for her act, and by including them as adversarial voices in this work, she looks back at how those stories had "fixed" her position in the family. For Christa, getting in touch with Camille means narrativizing in a public way her old obsessive memory of abandonment and the limited history it confined her to. In a positive sense the film demonstrates how family members can "authorize" new versions of family history as they weave old stories into a new pattern, constructing a new collective memory. As represented in the work, and as evidenced in viewers' ambivalent and conflicted responses to the work, this is an edgy, painful, and incomplete process. *Finding Christa* is a public act of self expression. In it, a re-constituted family re-writes the history of its members' personalities and constructs a public version of its mutual text. However, for the viewer, this film offers an uncomfortable "mutual" text since it is constructed around ambivalence, strong emotions, old grudges revived, conflicting subjectivities, loss, stubbornness, and the pain of change.

Narrative Structure of *Finding Christa*:

The film's title "*Finding Christa*" comes up over an image of a four year old's face and we also see a photo taken of Christa just before she was left at the orphanage. "Christa" is written in a child's hand, and Christa's voice off speaks the child's lament about abandonment, "My last memory of you is when you drove off and left me at the Children's Home Society. I didn't understand why you left me and I felt so alone. Why did you leave me?" (This audio may have been recorded from a tape recording which the Children's Home Society of Los Angeles sent Camille when Christa was trying to find her mother in 1980.) The voice off continues, "It's been so long since I felt complete. Why did you leave me?" The printed words, "Why did you leave me?" then become the first intertitle. We see Camille in her studio with photographer friend Coreen Rogers; Camille shows Coreen Christa's adult photo, tells Coreen about having a daughter, and says the daughter also sent her a tape. The film's introductory sequences incorporate photos and home movies from the 1950s when Camille was pregnant and a young mother (16 mm. home movies were made over a period of twenty years in the home of Camille's parents, Alma Dotson and stepfather, Walter E. Dotson). The film then presents interviews with family members, who discuss Camille's life at that time. They talk about how they all tried to stop Camille from giving up her child. Older cousin Bertha is the antagonist,

filmed in loving close up; she offers the most powerful indictment of Camille in the film, telling Camille that Camille gave Christa up for adoption at the time that she met James Hatch, her future husband.

The second section of the 55 minute film details Camille's coming into her own as an artist and her developing relation with Jim. They went to Egypt, where Jim taught drama and Camille had her first show. Mel Helstein narrates personal information that no one else could have given. He knew Camille and Jim were having an affair, he said, and his marriage was on the rocks, too, so he went to Egypt and joined them. In Egypt, as Camille in her studio tells Coreen, Camille had a special relation with a small girl who served as an emotional substitute for Christa.

The third section seems to be a dramatic reenactment in Camille's studio, where she plays a tape for two friends. Her yet-to-be-met adult daughter Christa had sent the tape, and Camille expresses her uncertainty as to whether or not to see the young woman. Coreen Rogers tells her own story about abandonment: she was a foster child and after becoming a mother herself, she tried to contact her birth mother, but that woman, over the phone, just kept saying, "I don't know you." The other friend in the room, playwright George C. Wolfe, said that now that Christa had appeared in her life, Camille had to respond in kind, but Camille talked only about how difficult such a decision was for her to make.

Two symbolic sequences then follow to represent Camille's decision. In one, Wolfe appears as an MC in dark glasses announcing "auditions for the mother daughter recital." A honky tonk piano player dressed in men's clothes (later understood to be Christa) plays a piano, while Camille dressed in a girl's white party dress with white knee socks and pumps, lips syncs a yodel and waves a white feather boa, standing on top of the piano. The dancer takes a bow and the piano player tips her hat. Freeze frame on a CU of the piano player while Christa's voice over asks, "I'd like to know if you'd write me or make contact with me." Camille turns away, making a gesture of horror. The following long take shows Camille in long shot in her living room skipping happily toward the camera, while we hear in voice off Camille's saying, "I guess I'll let her come."

An intertitle "Christa, where were you?" leads in to a section dominated by interviews with Christa's adopted mother, Margaret Liebig, perhaps the most sympathetic figure in the film. Also in this sequence are interviews with Christa and with her and her adopted brothers and sister. We also see Christa performing one of her own songs, with interview material of her talking about her work sporadically cut in on the audio track. Then there is an allegorical comic montage of her failed marriage, with interview material from her and Margaret cut in, and also songs that Margaret sings, "Because You're Mine" and "Stormy Monday."

The intertitle "OK, Christa, now what?" introduces the following sequences: the filming of a family reunion where Christa meets her maternal relatives; symbolically staged shots of Christa and Camille in New York looking at family photos, with a certain amount of edginess between them; and an interview with Christa talking to the camera, telling about meeting her father.

The last intertitle, "Almost Home," has a tender moment in which James Hatch, Camille's husband and co-director of the film, reads to Christa from his diary about Camille's feeling unable to care for a child; more of Christa's performances of what she calls her "life songs"; shots of the two mothers and Christa together in a park, with the older women walking arm in arm; and a symbolic scene, repeated from earlier in the film, of Jim and Camille waving sparklers in the night, calling out, "Welcome home, Christa."

What makes this film so rich, and why it brings new concepts to light and elicits different emotions on each viewing, is that it combines so many modes of discourse. In a postmodern way, it is an unstable text, apt for representing selves in conflict and flux. The tape shifts tone, from comic to thoughtful, without transition, and it incorporates many kinds of textual material. Such resources which the tape marshals for meaning production include old home movie images, dramatic reenactments, songs by Christa (now Christa Victoria) and her stepmother (Margaret is a professional singer with stage name of Rusty Carlyle), recollections from family and friends, orphanage records, photos as triggers for reflection, James Hatch's journal, and Christa's reenacting her reunion with Camille (it had occurred about eight years before the film was made). The film is constructed around the theme of the strata and fragments of its characters' lives, and it accomplishes this theme with the structure of a mosaic.

Furthermore, the film's multiple discursive formations are manipulated so as to cast doubt on any "simple" interpretation of the Camille-Christa story. We are asked to read the styles of filmed material complexly, judging the opinions of others for their truthfulness or bad consciousness, to fill in the life stories that are just suggested, to sympathize with people's periods of intense confusion at different moments of their lives. And the editing sets up different domains of meaning-making against each other. For some viewers, the "truth" will lie in the characters' facial gestures or emotional coding of voice, and such viewers will pass much of the film looking for moments in which the characters' personality will express itself most "authentically" (e.g., audio or visual signs read as indicating Camille's coldness, Bertha's and Coreen's sincerity, Christa's petulance, etc.). Other viewers will appreciate the way that the text sets in motion multiple, conflicting narratives, perhaps seeing in the film a miniature version of domestic life, in which every family member has her own version of collective history. Camille and Christa do not resolve their basic conflict, dating to the time Camille left Christa in the Children's Home. Their adult personalities are presented as fallible and contradictory. Instead of focusing just on the two women's motives and personalities, the film makes us equally consider how "a history" of self has to be constructed out of different vehicles of expression, ones that are motivated by forgetting and memory and desire. Furthermore, the details in the film do not all fit together nor are all the most pertinent details about the people in the film ever given. We have only scanty referential information in some parts and other segments are symbolic or inconclusive. In all its formal strategies, the film tries to preclude closure, even though desire for closure is what motivated Christa as she made contact with her birth mother.

Toward the end of the film, there is a key sequence between James Hatch and Christa. It has such dramatic Rembrandt lighting that it must have been staged. A stream of light

illuminates the pages of Jim's journal from which he has been reading aloud and also illuminates Christa's white blouse, leaving her face half in shadow. My own estimate as a producer is that they collaboratively set up the scene but did not rehearse it, since it has a touch of sadness that makes it seem more "authentic" than a rehearsed scene. Jim reads: "Camille signed over Christa today; the child was not concerned at all. We were rehearsing *Blackbird* those days. After rehearsing Camille got on a crying jag about Christa. I went for a cold ten minute walk to allow her the freedom of a real cry, (Christa looks sad). And when I returned she had written a story into her journal about how a child loved a toy (Christa's eyes very wide, she looks up) but didn't care for it. So she took it to a toy doctor who fixed it but told her that if she took the toy home again (camera moving in slowly on Christa), she had to love and care for it. So the little girl, knowing she couldn't, left the toy with the doctor. (Christa's face is sad and body rigid. She puts her head down, looks up and away from Jim. He looks at her and then down, his face in shadow. He closes his book with a thump.) And that's how it was in 1961. Makes you feel abandoned all over?" (CU. Two shot facing Christa, Jim's face in shadow) Christa: "Sometimes." (She cries and wipes away a tear). Jim: "Well, I guess I read it because I feel bad sometimes, too." (MS. He rocks, looking down at diary. She looks down, sad.)

It seems to me that in its construction and subject matter, the scene is calculated to elicit strong emotion, but it also sets in motion a multivalent audience response. There is some hostility on both Jim and Christa's parts as they attempt to get together emotionally. Jim expresses fatherly concern toward Christa, demonstrates his on-going support for Camille, and offers Christa the explanatory power of what he reads (the journal entry has explanatory power for the viewer as well). Christa seems forced back into re-experiencing the trauma while in a state of emotional isolation from Jim and Camille although temporarily residing in their home. The tape here juxtaposes intersecting frames of reference, three different people's emotions, and their diverse present situations in relation to their pasts. The combination of visual and verbal material in the scene hints at movements of emotion back and forth between different realms of each of the three's experiences, a choreography of emotional interconnections. In this scene, we can note the personal spaces developed for each character -- what each wants/wanted to assert as a psychic space and what, in collaboration with the others, each actually gets. Here, as is characteristic elsewhere in the film, the composition weaves an enclosed, intimate space. In fact, for Christa, the film takes care to set up many safe, protected boundaries -- newly established -- so as to allow Christa to experience with her new family (and once again on making the film eight years after the reunion) what for her is her permanently felt truth. Her primal self has been shaped by the formative effect of the abandonment. leading to a fractured self image and sense of self worth.

The mixture of narratives in this scene represents different ways of knowing and remembering. We each preserve discrete moments and experiences from the past, and each of us has our own mental images and our unique way of relating these in conversation as we use face-to-face interaction with others to write our personal history. Here the subject matter dealt with in the sequence is emotion, but we also intuit the characters' internal processes of change and loss. The story Camille had written is

metaphoric, and we may attribute a range of ambivalent emotions to it. The scene itself represents Jim's contribution to Christa's understanding and emotional growth. Whatever interpretation we make of the scene, it is hard not to receive it in a deeply emotional way, perhaps even angrily taking sides with Camille, Christa, or Jim.

Fifty Ways to Leave Your Daughter:

"I went to art school at USC in 1954 after having gone to City College in Los Angeles. At USC you had the most classical education possible for artists....It was a beautiful thing. Then I got pregnant, or as we say in *Finding Christa*, 'knocked up.' I had to change majors and go to another school. It threw me back three years, but I worked days, full time at the bank and went to school at night and finished. But at one point, I decided I didn't want to be anyone's mother. I wanted to go back to the place that I considered the crossroads." (Billops, interview with Ameena Meer, "Profiles and Positions," *Bomb*, Summer 1992, p. 22).

I wasn't mean; I just wasn't there. She was at a baby sitter's all the time. By the time I gave her up, I wasn't poor. I wasn't broke. I just didn't think that being an unwed mother was so special. I felt shackled. I wanted my life back. And I thought, if you care at all, then let her go. So I unmotherd myself. I seized an opportunity to give her to someone who would provide a good loving home." (Interview with Camille Billops, "Lost and Found," *TV Times*, June 28-July 4, 1992, *Los Angeles Times*, p. 7)

Interviews with Camille Billops provide more information than the film does about her motives and her personal history at the time she gave up Christa for adoption in the late 1950s. In the opening section of *Finding Christa*, she is content to let family members tell most of her tale. The images give a view of a middle class black family (from Southern California by way of Texas, and earlier, South Carolina), and the conversations among and interviews with relatives provide us with a view of the traditional black family in its moral cohesiveness and love for all its family members. Various her relatives say that Camille could have let Christa stay with them, that they begged her to change her mind, that she could have let them and sitters care for the child, that she could have been known to Christa as just an aunt, or that they would have liked to visit the child in the orphanage on a regular basis. Camille says that none of them came forward to adopt the child except her brother in law. (That man, as told in her earlier film *Suzanne*, *Suzanne*, regularly beat his wife and daughter, although this information is not given in *Finding Christa*.) *Finding Christa*'s opening section is slanted to let the family tell the most damning story possible about Camille and her motives, since that is probably the story they have circulated about her in conversation for years.

Camille resists others' definitions of her. Her behavior was that of an outlaw, and she made this decision just before leaving the country to travel to Egypt. Its consequences were far from tragic for her. She developed as an extremely talented artist, and she and her husband James Hatch have become important archivists and historians of black arts in the United States (Jones, Lekatsas). Her public self in that community is another aspect of her life that she does not present in the tape so as to set the positions in her family in sharp opposition to her from the beginning of the film.

She herself is the archetypal romantic hero, not usually seen in feminine guise. From the 19th century on, this figure has appeared in literature and later in film as an idealistic searcher or a creative genius who rejects established mores and lives as an outsider; s/he often allies herself with political causes and is flawed, bears a wound, or acts in self-destructive ways. When Christa finally meets Camille, Christa phones her mother Margaret to exclaim that Camille is a hippie (interviews confirm that Camille indeed was a flamboyant hippie in earlier years). In fact, Christa, too, is the wounded artist pursuing a quest. In presenting the lives and decisions of these two women, the film does not give either the traits of the virtuous or dutiful woman.

In many mainstream films, the main character is often a romantic hero, a reporter, detective, or artist -- an outsider -- who is allowed a complex subjectivity even though he may be flawed or an anti-hero. In many avant garde films, which often use a diaristic or autobiographical, personal mode of address, the see-er behind the camera and editing is implied to be such a person, and also implied is that he (it's usually a he) has a complex vision which we should pay attention to. When a film chooses to represent the subjectivity of someone from an oppressed group, it rarely assigns this person "the artist's" subjectivity. Camille's and later Christa's aggressive claim to this subjectivity, to that of artist and rebel, raises the question of whether or not ethnic subjects have the same cultural right to the ideology of individualism which has characterized the bourgeois era for several centuries. Or is the ethic of individualism and complex artistic sensibility somehow different when claimed by a person, especially a woman of color? (Mercer and Julien)

"*Finding Christa* is a plea for women to think about their choices. You should never let anyone take those choices away from you. The control words for women are moral words. They will call you a whore if you want to stand out on the street, just to find out the news. You can't hang out on that street. Men will circle and drive you away from public space." (Billops, interview with Ameena Meer, "Profiles and Positions," *Bomb*, Summer 1992, p. 22).

"See, that's the adventure they want to deny us, to hit the horses and ride the trail. And that's the information, that's where the news is. I don't think the news is all in the parlor; I think it's out there on the road. And those are the adventures. I mean women as adventuresome and adventurers -- I like that idea." (Camille Billops in filmed introduction to *Finding Christa*'s television debut on P.B.S. Point of View series, 1992)

Finding Christa resists and seeks to change definitions of motherhood. For Camille for years before meeting Christa, motherhood had been what Jung would call her liminal or shadow self. The title of this section of the essay refers to a popular song, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover," but when I uncomfortably substitute the word "Daughter," the change in the phrase's connotation points to acute contradictions which often exist in a "mother's" subjectivity but which are rarely spoken, written about, or socially acknowledged. In interviews, Camille has said that she considers Margaret Liebig the hero of the film and of her life, since that woman could give Christa such a good home. The film valorizes Margaret by presenting her in a totally positive way. In particular it is her spoken history of Christa's childhood and adolescence that is intercut against the

comic montage representing Christa's failed marriage. I cite Margaret's interview at length here because within the film it represents, if not ideal family life, ideal motherhood:

"I had my girl; I had raised her to the best of my ability, and she still was unhappy. She was jealous of everyone, she got mad about everything, but it was only because she wanted to have somebody to identify with.....I knew what she needed and I didn't know how to give it to her. And that was, she needed to know where her mother was, her family... I said, Christa, there's something I want you to do for me. I want you to find your mother. And she was in shock. Of course, she tried to pretend that it was all right, she didn't need to do that, she was happy. And she went through this big spiel like Christa does. But all behind that, her eyes just lit up when I said that, and she said, 'Do you really want me to do this?' And I said, 'Yes, I want you to do this -- for me...'"

Camille had left her address at the orphanage when placing Christa there, so the tape, entitled *Finding Christa*, is basically from Camille's point of view. However, at the end of the film, a scene showing the two mothers walking in a park arm in arm leaves Christa visually isolated. Christa's voice over speaks these words:

"You know, it's a blessing to have two mothers, but at times it can be difficult, especially when both are strong willed people. Sometimes I feel as if I'm pulled apart, as if no one sees my side because there are two dominant sides, and I'm caught in the middle."

Camille and Margaret had agreed that because Christa wanted to become a professional singer, it was best if she moved to New York so that Camille could help her career. When the film concludes with the two mothers in friendship agreeing about Christa's needs, it eases the acuity of the contradictions the film had presented around a mother's giving up a child. However, in interviews, Camille speaks of the new relation as still fraught with pain, ten years after her reunion with the adult child:

"Whatever our relationship becomes over the years, it is something that has to be worked at very hard. We live quite separate lives. Our contact is very casual because there is still a perception of abandonment that will never be resolved. It is not simple and it is not without pain. There are days when I think, 'What did I do this for?' and days when I am sure she thinks the same thing. (Camille Billops to Patricia A. Smith, "Mother-and-Child Reunion," *The Boston Globe*, June 29, 1992, p. 38)"

The whole first section of the tape is echoed by a later section where Christa meets Camille's extended family. The tape's emphasis on images of family, with people talking about their family memories as the mainstay of filmed conversation, has both a political and philosophical purpose. People look to families for self definition but also rebel against families when the definitions imposed by others are too confining. In addition, for oppressed and poor communities, the family provides a network for survival, both physically and culturally. It maintains the minority culture as a culture because it preserves collective wisdom and memory. The tape's layered, mosaic-like structure represents facets of identity formation and how these change historically. The tape's choreographing of a black family's voices is both a tribute to that kind of extended

family and a challenge to it. *Finding Christa* looks at society's value systems, the values maintained by the black family, and the one's Billops wants to explore. She asserts her own story as a moral lesson about survival in contrast to the family's version of how it as a unit should survive, and of course, the family shifts with changes among its members. Earlier Camille and James Hatch had made the film *Suzanne, Suzanne*, with accompanying music by Christa Victoria, about Camille's sister Billie and niece Suzanne. Those two women had to come to terms with the way that Suzanne's father's brutality had led to Suzanne's heroine addiction, with how his abuse was hidden behind the facade of middle class prosperity, and with the failure of mother and daughter to unite against it or even discuss it in private (Smith 1994).

Both *Finding Christa* and *Suzanne, Suzanne* use film's formal resources to choreograph the family, their voices and interpretations. As we see the many (mostly) women in the tape discuss how they and others have acted, the film also uses many kinds of audio and video modes of presentation to expose both the ideology and the emotional urgency behind what they say. One of the functions of the film, it seems, is to elicit reflection on the discourses that shaped its participants. Furthermore, the collective family knowledge that Billops builds the film on is not something abstract but the negotiated, interactive and painful process of face-to-face oral communication, something she is willing to confront again in the making of the film.

All the conversations and interviews in the film circle around the connections between love, obligation, and circumstance. It is what audience members usually want to talk about after having seen the tape. It recapitulates the way we talk about family and about women's and children's roles. Camille's family had certain specific facts to discuss: the children's home, adoption, Camille's going with her lover to Egypt. Beyond that, cruel-mother stories often circulate orally among women, as well as stories of mean men and rebellious children. In recapitulating these themes, melodramas, soap operas, and talk shows draw a large female audience. This film, however, offers little of the familiar emotional frisson that such stories traditionally bring with them. For Billops, re-shaping family memory is her goal as a feminist filmmaker, since she wishes to demonstrate in both *Finding Christa* and *Suzanne, Suzanne* how family memory works and what it silences.

What *Finding Christa* accomplishes is to create a new way of speaking for and about African American women, especially about the black family structure and black women's experiences. African American women artists and writers have often shaped their narratives to echo patterns found in the extended family's conversation, which makes an intergenerational claim on the meaning of any one member's experience (Braham. p. 118). A lot of work has been written on the strengths of the black family, noting how slavery kept it fragmented and how members migrated north looking for work (Davis, Jones, Stack). Camille Billops considers another related aspect of the black family, that is, that men's picking up and moving on is a fact that the community has tacitly accepted as a norm. She demanded a kind of equity, reversed gender roles and "walked out" -- not knowing that she might later reinterpret this as a "feminist" act. *Finding Christa* explores what the implications of such a role reversal have meant for Camille, Christa, and Camille's extended family. Camille self consciously reflects on her situation as a

black woman artist, which she uses in the film as both a personal and cultural locus, a point from which she explores her personal history so as to trace out the social and psychic forces that have shaped her and those around her. She resists being a group voice, and the film's fragmented structure precludes us coming to any concept of global identity that would characterize her or Christa.

Performance:

Performance is an integral part of daily life, and it takes on a special meaning in autobiography, written or filmed, and in documentary media. From birth to death, even our physical bodies are allowed and forbidden certain performances, and we are socially conditioned from childhood on to move and position ourselves in culturally meaningful ways. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes called this positioning the mundane "theater of posing" in which I strive to create my life in the face of conventions and rituals that would appropriate me. I have a need to appear as a certain kind of person to others, but I also want to act spontaneously, i.e., not pose, which is impossible to achieve. In autobiography, the writer is constantly evaluating, "How did I perform my life?" and also structuring a form with which to present the self to the public, that is, an artistic structure that is an analog to performing the self. In documentary, the filmmaker seeks interviewees or images of people who have good "screen presence" and while filming, must think of ways to put the people on screen at ease so as to elicit a "good performance" from them. In editing my own video documentaries, I choose interview material which dramatically relates anecdotes from the past, evokes strong sensory imagery, and dwells on obstacles and conflict. In particular, all documentarists value the moment when the camera has captured someone's tears or spontaneous gestural expression, since these give the sense of "that person is really being sincere." Many camera people shooting an event know to zoom in on the clenched fist or jaw, the teary eye, the shoulder turned defiantly away. Such a visual style seemingly offers viewers "true" visual signs of authentic expression coming from the deepest layers of the self. For this reason, filmed autobiography always contains within it tension between the camera person's decisions and the main figures' presentation of self.

Finding Christa has its moments of deliberate performance (what sociologist Erving Goffman called framing one's self presentation), and it also comments on how the people in the tape gauge each other's performative aspect. Camille had been an actress in the fifties in *Fly Blackbird*, a play co-directed by James Hatch, which is where she met him. In *Finding Christa*, her gestural code includes many moments of "guying," that is, clueing the audience that she is exaggerating. Furthermore, much of her visual art is satiric and witty, and all her and Hatch's co-directed films focus on the performativity of daily life, usually for a political purpose.

Finding Christa largely consists of dramatic reenactment, and as Camille has noted in interviews, for Christa, this kind of dramatic performance based on her life awakened the old pain in all its force. In a different way, other shots which depict Christa are also rife with performance. I had the sense that she was the irritating sibling, especially in adolescence and early marriage, performing all the time in a grand sulk, but I know that my reading may also come from resonances with my own family. When I first saw the

film, I identified completely with Christa and her feelings of injustice and abandonment. However, I also admired Camille as a filmmaker who could make an unflattering portrait of herself and interview the family members who had condemned her.

I also thought when I first saw the film that it included three complete singing performances by Christa, and that this public exposure of her work was her payoff for making the film with Camille. However, in doing a shot analysis of the work, I realized that all Christa's performances have extensive interview material with her cut in over the music track. In these interviews, she tells us she would like to become known for her music, which she defines as "life songs." "Most of my music, pretty much all of my music, is from what I feel from the heart. And it's not really commercial."

Now I find Christa's music artless. The film shows how accomplished Camille is in various artistic media and how Margaret is a fine professional blues singer. My students are generally not as judgmental as I am about Christa's music when they see the film, perhaps because they want me to embrace their own early awkward creative efforts with uncritical enthusiasm. Since what I admire about *Finding Christa* is its sophisticated use of the film medium to craft a work which questions identity construction at so many levels, never giving a unitary perspective on self, Christa's eschewing responsibility for the artistic crafting process and claiming that this makes her songs somehow more "authentic" do not ring true. For example, some of the lyrics she sang in a song she wrote and performed on camera, narrating her own psychological condition, include the following:

"Somewhere deep down inside you there's a little voice that's saying, 'Stop what you're doing.' Listen, for there's a ray of hope that stops you from losing something, the hope to find the strength to set yourself free from this prison of need, this little white lie that you keep inside you...."

Sincerity, Authenticity, and Authorization:

If I challenge the value of Christa's art, built on the basis of sincerity as a sufficient vehicle of expression, in a more telling way I would challenge the "authority" of *Finding Christa* in masking its time line (made nearly ten years after Christa and Camille met) and in mixing interview material, dramatic reenactments, family reunions, and what might be Christa's original tape recording sent to Camille as if they were all from the time that Christa first contacted Camille. My own judgment of dramatic reenactments comes from my knowledge as a video producer of how staged material looks. However, I did not know that much of the rest of the material was a reenactment until reading Camille's 1991-92 interviews. Some things are still unclear. What might be home movies? The section showing the family reunion where Christa meets Camille's relatives who welcome her as kin seems marked as original, spontaneously filmed material, showing mugging close ups of Christa, holding her face next to each person in turn, as if to test if they all had a family resemblance. Was this footage of an ordinary event or staged as Christa's reunion with them years after she had gotten in touch with Camille? The answer to this question about home movie vs. staged footage has ethical implications that the film never deals with.

At this point it is worth taking a close look at the dramatic reenactment in Camille's atelier with her two friends, telling them Christa had contacted her and wanted to see her. In considering this sequence and indeed the tape as a whole, I am fascinated with the probable time line of the various kinds of filmic material used. In the studio, Coreen, Camille's friend tells the story of her own life, the pain having her mother deny her the chance to enter the mother's life. If this is a performance, it is one that elicits the teller's own remembered hurt. George Wolfe tries to get Camille to respond to Christa's overture and Camille demurs. What is the date of this dramatic reenactment in Camille's work space? I assume it is a dramatic reenactment from internal visual evidence, such as change of shot set up to make traditional shot-reverse shot and over-the-shoulder-shot conversational patterns. But nowhere is it mentioned in the film that sections are dramatic reenactments nor is such an interpretation necessarily or even likely to be the response of viewers who see the film only once. If the date of that shoot were before Camille met Christa, which the film lets viewers easily assume, then it would mean that Camille had decided to make an autobiographical tape on the subject of having abandoned her daughter before getting her not-yet-met daughter's assent.

Furthermore, we see shots of Camille's greeting Christa in the airport which look like home movies of an important family event, capturing spontaneous emotional reactions. At that moment did Camille have Jim shoot such footage for a future documentary project that Christa did not know about yet? Since the film blurs all time lines and indications of the relation of its own production to originary documents, the viewer does not know. I assume that Christa did send a tape with her music on it to Camille: "I wrote a song for you," the taped phone message tells us. When Camille responded to Christa's overtures in a Christmas phone call, we hear the recording of Christa's excited voice answering the call. Is *this* original material or dramatic reenactment? The ethical implications are that if that were original material, it would have been illegally taped. And what hubris it would have been to tape such an intimate, spontaneous, emotionally important moment in Christa's, if not Camille's, life!

In this way, the film presents a particular problem which I call the problem of "authorization." I have already indicated the way in which this piece was never intended to be a culture's or group's version of the truth but rather that its makers authorized themselves to create an account of their mutual, interacting histories which they deemed valuable enough to be made public. However, autobiography sets itself up in terms of what Phillipe Lejeune has called an autobiographical "pact" with the reader/viewer, that is, a pact that referential truth will be respected, that we will not be lied to. Of course, the facts of the past, what is being referred to, will be confused and mediated by texts -- both present day interviews and artifacts from the past. But, as John Paul Eakin notes, the genre depends on not abusing our trust in reference. This kind of trust in the authentic *intentions* of first person narratives leads even other artists not to see all the elements of "constructedness" in a film such as *Finding Christa*. In my classes when I show certain films that seem autobiographical, for example, Jim McBride and L.M. Kit Carson's *David Holzman's Diary* or Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite*, and then the films state in the end credits that they were acted, among the film students in the class, a good number always express surprise -- because the film's set up had made them watch it according to the autobiographical pact even though their production savvy should have

clued them that certain shots were impossible or improbable for autobiographical shooting. *Finding Christa* has no such information in the end credits nor does it ever signal which shots or audio material are originary material from the time of the reunion in 1981.

The viewer receives all the interview material in *Finding Christa* as occurring in approximately the same time span, perhaps about a year. I think that viewers do not notice the time differences in gathering and shaping the material (which Camille said was reworked over a number of years because of the difficulty in getting funding). Most viewers probably never confront what for me as a media maker is a crucial question: At what time did the idea for the film, as it were, get born? On the sound track, the information that Camille and Christa and Margaret give verbally provides the basic exposition necessary for understanding the film. The viewer, who receives the film in the span of an hour along with all of its ambivalent emotional moments, needs the exposition as the film unfolds before her, so that the interviews and dramatic reenactments are all lent a certain aura of "simultaneity" and perhaps also spontaneity.

Taking Sides -- For Christa or For Camille:

Finding Christa evokes a strong reaction among audience members and critics especially since it takes as its subject matter shifting, strong, polarizing emotions. Audiences who get a chance to discuss the film are often vehemently divided, frequently siding with Camille or Christa. I have myself have widely different reactions to Christa or Camille at different viewings of the work, which calls up memories of my own decision not to have children and my own ambivalent love-hate relation with my mother. In this essay I have given a reading which favors Camille, partly based on my reading her interviews in preparation for my writing. Furthermore, I am giving this reading as a white academic who eagerly reads works by women of color and seeks out their films and tapes to view and teach. I know that my reading cannot decode all the connotations of race and gender that the film contains, nor appreciate how they are artistically worked, including assumptions about selfhood which circulate in the African American community which the film depicts.

Rather, I have read the film for the pleasure and tension we anticipate from turning to a text by a woman which promises in its title and publicity to be about issues of motherhood and abandonment. From Christa's perspective, which I also share, the film echoes my own grudges that I carry around with me, my own stubbornness in recalling family pain, my own acute past desire for plenitude and closure in relation to my parents. Audience members who were abandoned may not get past that memory in their response to the work, while others who feel some distance from both Camille and Christa, may find pleasure in viewing the work as a performance and an artistic construct, enjoying its postmodern artifice.

In *Crucial Conversations: Interpreting Contemporary American Literary Autobiographies by Women*, Jeanne Braham analyzes how women's autobiography offers an invitation to women readers to enter the narrative in an emotional and analytic way. She says that the source of our empathy with the text is the way that it calls up

responses in us. It resonates with our lived experience, psychological formation, or past history. In that way, an autobiographical text that I respond to, or in this case a viewer's strong response to Christa or Camille, interpellates or hails my subjectivity, indeed confirms it: another has publicly claimed what I have long known to be my truth.

"That this (decision to put Christa out for adoption) was a feminist statement was a hindsight. Everyone had a problem with it. Men leave, but women are supposed to endure. Fatherless houses, unwed mothers -- is that something attractive? I didn't think so, so I reversed it. They say you don't have a lot of choices but you do; you just have to have the courage to take them." (Camille Billops to Lynda Jones, "Dream On, Dreamer," *Village Voice*, September 6, 1994, p. 60)

For me, one of the tape's virtues is that it makes viewers feel uncomfortable. Camille is a not a good woman, but an interesting one. In terms of its themes, *Finding Christa* challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and categories and shows alternative ways of expressing personhood, agency, and family. In viewing it repeated times, I take great pleasure in noting how the images and events and persons are framed by the film, as well as how the people within the film frame their discussions of the past, each other and themselves.

It is important in contemporary times that we look at the social and historical conditions that shape our caring about something, both what matters to the viewer and what matters to others, whom the viewer might not under ordinary circumstances come to understand (Grossberg, pp. 82-85). Black families in the United States have always understood how their members must embrace multiple identities and how their children must learn what W.E.B. DuBois defines as "double consciousness" since all the family members will have one life inside the home and another "out there." While *Finding Christa* seems to be dealing primarily with Camille's personhood, someone who defines herself as a black artist, it is also socially mapping an intervention in the family, both the black family and everyone else's.

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